

ARTS IN EDUCATION

A whole lot of writing happens at Smith Elementary School

By Anne Bauer

There's a whole lot of writing going on at Smith Elementary School in Helena. It started in the spring of 2010 when then-principal Pamela Wright started a poetry residency.

Central School in Helena had a poetry residency for two years at that point, and she wanted to give it a try. Following the model established by the Missoula Writing Collaborative, teachers, students and the poet had enjoyed great success.

Central students made measurable gains in writing proficiency during the residency with the talented and enthusiastic writer Caroline Patterson, got published in a handful of publications, and learned to love (or better appreciate) words as a means of being understood. (Patterson has since moved to Missoula and writer Krys Holmes will teach the residency at Central this year.)

Patterson agreed to teach a second residency at Smith; the Montana Arts Council agreed to fund 50% of the cost; the Collaborative agreed to support another residency; and the program was off and running in the fall of 2010. The following year, I came on as writer.

The program supplements the work being done by the classroom teachers by focusing on poetry and often builds prompts around specific curriculum units or the broader six traits of effective writing. Poets such as Sheryl Noethe, Jennifer Greene, Loren Graham and Mandy Smoker Broadbudds have come in and shared their poetry and stories about their process.

All students in the fourth and fifth grades participate in the 15-week residency. Students learn that poetry is a versatile medium for self-expression and engage in it weekly. The students find that their poetry means something to them, and then they begin to understand the connection between what they mean and what they say.

They become motivated to work with language to ensure they are understood. In some cases, this experience is nothing short of life-changing.

Poetry makes a difference

Every reading, I hear from students and parents how poetry has made a difference. I'll never forget one father who told me that writing poetry made his son – a boy who was familiar with the inside of the principal's office – see himself in a new way. Hearing the sensitivity and facile language in his son's poem moved the man to pride, and to tears.

I'll never forget the mother who told me how touched her father was by the poem her daughter wrote about their fishing trip, and how, when her father died without warning days later, what a comfort that poem was.

I had a similar experience in the seventh grade. The Arts Council funded a poet to come into what was then Helena Junior High. I'll never forget how the poet flipped her blonde braid back and looked me straight on to tell me my work had merit. It opened up my whole world. Suddenly, so much more seemed possible for me: I was good at something.



Smith Elementary School students Alan Watne (above) and Lydia Dietz (at left) read from their work.

Anything Is Possible

by Carsen Schaff
(Teacher: Mr. Thompson)

In my imagination anything is possible like Santa riding Comet, kids and schools getting along flying pigs, ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Bobcats winning against Griz but only once, Giant sour rainbow cats and Voldemort and Harry being friends. I like it there to be cause you can be anything you want like a superhero pirate, but I like being a giant rainbow parrot ... with a cape.

(Carsen's poetry also appears in the anthology of student writing, *Signatures from Big Sky*)

Parents support the arts

Parents believe the program is as valuable as the teachers do. According to current Smith principal Jilyn Oliveira, "They help pay for it." The Montana Arts Council grant pays half of the cost of the residency. The other half comes from the school budget and from the parent council, Parents for Smith School.

Many, many people in the Smith School community support the arts and this enthusiasm led to more opportunities for the kids.

After-school writing club

The accomplished and talented writer Rebecca Stanfel has started an after-school writing club at Smith. The experience of having such a creative and inspiring writer working shoulder to shoulder with them every Monday afternoon throughout the school year will stay with those children forever.

Stanfel met with two-dozen students between second and fifth grades. Her students sampled various genres, including journalism, short stories, non-fiction essays and poetry, and produced an anthology of work. She helped the children practice the art and craft of writing, and bring to the paper just the right image and detail.

Stanfel says she "wouldn't be surprised to learn that several of the kids were sparked by the poetry residency and then self-selected for the after-school writing club. The poetry program gets children comfortable with writ-

ing," she continued, "helping them learn they can express themselves in the written form."

Each of these two programs helps students find their voice, Stanfel says. "Poetry is a great medium to work with for kids who have a range of abilities. The after-school program also empowers students to find their voice and to write their own truth, but the main difference is the format – poetry versus the narrative writing."

Stanfel notes that we don't typically think children can master narrative writing until they are a little bit older, but that she found her students excelled in it. "One student, a second grader, wrote about walking in this amazing snow storm with her father. That was the highlight of her year, and she wrote about it beautifully," Stanfel says.

Oliveira strongly supports both programs. The children have phenomenal reading abilities, Oliveira says, but "the one area in which we lack as a district is writing because it takes so much time to teach and is so hard to grade objectively. This helps the teachers out because we can bring in someone from the outside, so to speak, who loves poetry."

Teachers enjoy the program and are eager to get going again, she said. "It's great to see the growth in the kids because of the poetry program," she continued.

Through committed efforts by the Arts Council, the Missoula Writing Collaborative, parents, schools, and writers, language arts make a difference in the lives of fourth and fifth graders in Helena. Art lives!

Art and photo contest celebrates historic bridge

Preservation Cascade, Inc. is sponsoring an Art and Photo Contest for 14-18-year-olds on Nov. 10 at the Great Falls Public Library.

Students are invited to create artworks that focus on the Historic 10th Street Bridge that spans the Missouri River in Great Falls.

The organization is awarding prizes in each category of \$100 for first place, \$75 for second place and \$50 for third place.

The minimum size is 8-by-10 inches,

and the maximum size is 18-by-24 inches. All entries must be original and have the historic bridge as their subject.

Finished work must be submitted to Lisa Easton at Great Falls High School before Nov. 5, and will be displayed at the Great Falls Public Library. Local artists and photographers will select the winning entries Nov. 10.

For details, call Arlyne Reichert at 406-452-5492.



T.E.A. grants available

The Montana Arts Council continues to offer Teacher Exploration of the Arts (TEA) grants. This program is for elementary classroom teachers or K-8 teachers with an elementary endorsement, who are asked to teach visual art or music and do not have a background in that subject, and wish to work one-on-one with a professional working artist in order to develop skills in a particular artistic discipline.

Disciplines include dance, literary arts, media arts, music, theatre and visual arts.

For more information, go to art.mt.gov/schools/schools_tea.asp.